TL0984-2

ANSWERING THE APOLOGISTS

Responses to common myths
and arguments used by
defenders of the annexation
of East Timor

ARGUMENT: TEN YEARS HAVE PASSED SO SHOULDN'T WE FORGET ABOUT THE MATTER ?

When France fell and it was occupied by Germany, should Britain have forgotten about it and made negotiations with Germany to suit itself ? Should we forget about Afghanistan ? Why don't we recognise the 40-year old incorporation of the Baltic States into the USSR ? Why keep negotiating with the Vietnamese for an orderly withdrawal from Cambodia ?

While the East Timorese continue to call and fight for self-determination, the East Timor issue will not go away.

It is in the long-term interest of Australia and our region that a just and lasting solution be found for the Timorese.

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MYTH: THE EAST TIMORESE NOW ACCEPT INTEGRATION.

After ten years of military occupation, there is no credible evidence that the East Timorese have resigned themselves to integration and given up hope for the chance to determine their own future.

The head of the East Timor Catholic Church, Monsignor Belo, is reflecting the reports from his priests about East Timorese attitudes throughout the territory when he continues to openly call for self-determination.

The leadership of the armed resistance continues to call for talks with the Indonesian military, calls for self-determination and undertakes to provide "any and all countries of our immediate vicinity with concrete guarantees of our full cooperation for the sake of peace and stability in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific regions."

An academic specialist on the Indonesian military estimated in February this year that, allowing for regular troop rotation, "it would appear that virtually all (Indonesian) combat-ready forces are tied up by the East Timorese resistance" (Far Eastern Economic Review, 14.2.85).

Internal Indonesian army documents held by Amnesty International indicate extensive resistance networks within Indonesian-controlled villages in Timor. Reports from Indonesia indicate the head of Indonesia's armed forces and architect of the Timor invasion, General Murdani, is increasingly embarrassed by the inability of his forces to eliminate Timorese resistance.

The survival, indeed strengthening of armed resistance since 1980 and the courageous calls from the Catholic Church for self-determination are adequate testimony to continued rejection of integration by the East Timorese.

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MYTH: NOTHING CAN BE DONE TO ASSIST EAST TIMORESE ASPIRATIONS

Indonesian Government reaction to statements by Australians on the Timor issue; private admissions by Indonesian officials that economic development in Timor is designed to mute international criticism of the annexation; the considerable resources put into its diplomatic campaign to gain acceptance of its actions - are all testimony to the sensitivity of the Indonesian Government on this question.

Jakarta has literally gotten away with murder over East Timor precisely because the countries which have been in the best position to urge on Jakarta a correct course (including Australia), have chosen instead to give tacit approval to its actions.

Jakarta may react angrily at first to principled Australian support for East Timorese self-determination, but it would have an enormous impact on Indonesian thinking and international opinion. Such a course would have wide support within the Australian community.

We are in a position to take steps at the United nations and on the international scene. Those who argue that we cannot do anything privately admit that sooner or later we will have to challenge some Indonesian Government actions. As things stand, when it comes to dealing with the growing West Irian/ Papua New Guinea problem, our Government's current Timor position may prove to be Australia's "Munich".

Something can and should be done. What has been missing so far is the 'political will' to do it.

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MYTH: THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT'S CURRENT APPROACH IS THE BEST WAY TO HELP THE EAST TIMORESE.

The Fraser and Hawke Governments have argued that the best way to influence Indonesia over East Timor is through quiet diplomacy.

The Fraser Government's record is well known for its failure to offer any serious defence of the rights of the Timorese.

The most significant event in East Timor since the Labor Government came to power has been the 1983-84 Indonesian offensive which, according to Amnesty International, led to an enormous upsurge in human rights violations including the reported deaths of hundreds of Timorese.

The Government cannot claim that its policies have stimulated Indonesian economic development in East Timor. Indonesian development strategy in Timor was well in place by March 1983.

The Indonesian Government has moved in the past to allow international aid agencies into Timor and to promote economic development to attempt to quell international criticisms of the annexation. "Quiet diplomacy" presents no problems for Jakarta.

The best way to help the East Timorese is not to pontificate about how their best interests are served but rather, to consult with them and ask them what they want.

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MYTH: INDONESIAN DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS IN TIMOR LEGITIMIZE THE ANNEXATION.

Indonesian integration strategy from December 1975 to mid-1979 was marked by major military operations aimed at gaining control of the population. Those military operations and the concurrent exclusion of any international emergency aid until late 1979 resulted in the concentration of the bulk of the population in strategic centres called "resettlement villages" and the deaths through starvation and disease of at least 100,000 people.

Indonesian strategy since then has been more a "hearts and minds" strategy supported by periodic military campaigns. Indonesia has spent considerable sums of money on housing and schools in the "resettlement villages" - which remain the cornerstone of Indonesian attempts to control the population and to "Indonesianise" Timorese kids with language and history. Considerable sums have also been spent on infrastructure - including administrative buildings and roads.

While Indonesian spending in East Timor has demonstrably increased since 1980, several queries remain:

- There has been no detailed independent assessment of Indonesian claims about dollars spent in Timor;
- How much of the development serves the interests of military strategy ?
- How much of the development assists Indonesian administrators and settlers rather than Timorese ? The 1983 Australian Parliamentary Delegation found evidence that new buildings in parts of Timor were for Indonesians, not Timorese.

In any event, Indonesian economic spending has not lessened East Timorese calls for self-determination.

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MYTH: THERE IS LITTLE INTERNATIONAL INTEREST IN THE TIMOR ISSUE.

In non-government circles there is increasing international interest in events in East Timor. The following are indications of this interest:

- June 1985: Amnesty International published its detailed report on extensive human rights violations in East Timor.
- June 1985: Over 400 parliamentarians, mainly European and American, issued a declaration condemning Indonesian violations of human rights and calling for East Timorese self-determination.
- July 1985: Some 110 church organisations of different denominations in Asia, the Pacific and Australia signed a declaration of support for Timorese self-determination.
- May 1985: 131 U.S. Democrat and Republican members of Congress urged President Reagan to express American concern over "the tragedy of Timor".

In Indonesia itself there are signs of increasing disquiet:

- Senior representatives of the highly respected Legal Aid Institute in Jakarta told an Australian Parliamentary Delegation that if there was open debate in Indonesia, "intellectuals, at least, would reject the incorporation of East Timor which they found shameful and sad".
- The well connected and highly conservative Indonesian Catholic Church in late 1983 expressed its "solidarity and friendship with the .. people of East Timor who are being deluged by most bitter trials both physically and spiritually."

There has been a decline in support for East Timor by governments at the UN - but not because governments have been persuaded that East Timorese now accept integration.

A principled Australian Government stand in support of East Timorese self-determination could open up new initiatives which would assist a renewal of interest by other governments.

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JUSTIFICATION: THE PORTUGUESE WERE BAD COLONIALISTS; THE TIMORESE ARE BETTER-OFF UNDER INDONESIA.

It can easily be argued that the Timorese profited very little from much of their time under Portugal and that at times, they were badly treated by the colonial government.

However, in 1974 when a socialist-leaning government took over in Portugal, it set in train a decolonisation process and East Timorese were given the choice of establishing an independent country, remaining with Portugal or joining Indonesia.

The young Portuguese officers in Timor worked hard to encourage political thinking, promote the decolonisation process and to help the Timorese to help themselves.

The argument that the Indonesians who have put to death over one hundred thousand people directly or indirectly through their brutal annexation are far better colonialists than the Portuguese is rather weak to say the least.

To claim that a government which is still murdering its own people through vigilante killings; to claim that people who have perpetrated murder, rape and plunder in East Timor are better than the Portuguese ....is an absurdity.

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